

PSALM 23 (p. 441)

APRIL 25, 2021

JOHN 10:11-18 (p. 870)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Awaken us to your Presence, Lord, and fill us with your Holy Spirit. Calm our spirits, so that we might hear your voice. Open our minds, so that we might learn your truth. And touch our hearts, please, so that we might come to know you that much better. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"THE SHEPHERD"

According to Church Tradition, today is Shepherd Sunday! Maybe you noticed from our texts? So, I found a story in "Leadership Journal" that seemed appropriate. Apparently, a group of Turkish soldiers, during World War I, tried to steal a flock of sheep from a hillside outside of Jerusalem. The Shepherd was sleeping, but awoke to find his entire flock being driven off by the bandits. With no hope of re-capturing them single-handedly, the Shepherd did the only thing he could. He put his hands to his mouth and gave out a special call, the one he used daily to gather his sheep into the fold.

The sheep, on hearing the familiar sound, immediately stopped to listen. Then, when they heard it again, they turned as one, and rushed down into the ravine and up the other side, stopping right to the feet of their Shepherd! The whole thing happened so fast that it was impossible for the Soldiers to stop the fleeing sheep! Because of their unique relationship with the Shepherd, their daily contact in his presence, the sheep recognized his call instantly, and responded accordingly! And before the enemy could pursue, the sheep and the Shepherd were safely away!

“I am the Good Shepherd,” says our Lord. “My sheep listen to my voice.” “I know my sheep, and my sheep know me.” That’s the take home for today! Our sermon in a nutshell! But have you ever stopped to consider what that means?

Like I said, it’s Shepherd Sunday. And Jesus, often in Scripture, is described as our Shepherd. We Believers are those who “Follow His Lead”, right? But what does that look like from where we stand here in the pasture? What does it take to be a member of this Herd? What choices do we need to make in order to be “Faithful Sheep”? In other words, “How are we, at discerning the Good Shepherd’s Call”?

Both of our readings for today address that topic. In fact, all four of the assigned Lectionary Texts do! First John Three, talks about the “Amazing Love of our Shepherd”. About how He “willingly laid down His life for us”! The Apostle then goes on to emphasize how we, also, need to be willing to lay down our lives for each other! That is the essence of Flock Mentality!

Then in Acts, Chapter Four, we find Peter and John standing before the Great Sanhedrin, explaining why they healed a man. We talked about it briefly last week. And they answer that they did it because they follow the Shepherd! It’s in Jesus’ Name that we performed this miracle! For His Glory, this man was made whole! “Salvation,” they proclaim “is found in no one else”!

Then there is the 23rd Psalm, our First Reading this morning. “The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.” You know it. You might even have it memorized. “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” Maybe you know it with slightly different words. “Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me!”

A Rod, in case you didn’t know, is a tool to keep the sheep moving, often with a swat on the rear end. And a Staff, or Shepherd’s Crook, is used to keep them heading in the right direction! “He guides me along righteous paths. He prepares a table before me, in the presence of my enemies. Even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will not fear!” It’s pretty self-explanatory, isn’t it. And popular. We shared it just yesterday at a funeral.

Which bring us to our Gospel lesson. I’ll bet it too is at least familiar. “I am the Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd will lay down His life for his sheep!” “I call my sheep, and they know my voice.” Even when they are surrounded by danger, like from wolves, or soldiers in World War I, “My sheep come when I call!” “I am the gate by which they enter, the Shepherd whom they follow. I love those who follow me. In fact, I love them so much, that I willingly lay down my life for them!”

There is theme, isn’t there? A continuous thread that weaves through Scripture. Jesus is our Shepherd, our Lord, the One we Faithfully Follow! And we are the furry little critters of His Flock! But again, what does that look like? What’s our role? What does it take, to be a member of Jesus’ Flock?

All of these sheep metaphors would have made perfect sense to a First Century Shepherd. Or to anyone who lived near a First Century Shepherd! Which was pretty much everyone. All of Israel would have immediately gotten the message. It would have been obvious! The problem is, none of us are First Century Shepherds, or know First Century Shepherds! Most of us don't even know any Shepherds at all! Although I have to tell you, Jenny Bradford has been helpful with pointers, from time-to-time!

The rest of us though, may need some explaining, some context. Unfortunately, my entire repertoire of "Sheep Knowledge" comes from watching Saturday morning cartoons as a kid. Oh, I read a few books in Seminary, and a few since. But cartoons are way more fun! Specifically, the Looney Tunes, Wiley E. Coyote cartoons! Not the ones with the Road Runner. Those are some of my favorites. But they don't have any sheep! I'm talking about the Wiley E. Coyote Cartoons with those two great big Sheepdogs, Ralph and Sam, remember!

Every morning, just as the sun started to crest over the hills, one of those Sheepdogs would report for work. He'd punch the time-clock, set his lunchbox down beside a tree, and relieve the other Sheepdog from duty. He'd then settle in for whatever the day might bring. The faithful guardian was now in place. It's his turn to watch over the flock. Do you remember?

The hungry Coyote would try every trick in the book to steal a sheep from the flock. But the ever-vigilant Sheepdog would dutifully thwart each and every one! He wasn't about to let a predator abscond with one of his care! They were his responsibility, right? And he handled his job well, all day, each and every day! And then, at the end of the day, after all the near disasters, just as the sun was about to dip below the horizon, the second Sheepdog would report for duty. He would also punch in and take up his post. And then the first guy would just walk away! I have to tell you, though, that always bothered me. For some reason, he was no longer accountable. That seemed kind of strange.

Another thing that seemed strange was that during this time, with all those potential dangers lurking about, the sheep always seemed oblivious! Not one of them realized the tremendous effort that the Sheepdog put in on their behalf! Oh, there might be a bleat or two every now and then, just before they were rescued from the Coyote's hands. But almost immediately, when the danger was over, they'd go right back to munching on their own little patch of grass! They had no clue how much work went into protecting them, no inkling of the sacrifice involved on their behalf!

And those Sheepdogs, if you recall, were just hired hands! The sheep didn't even belong to them! They punched in and out, remember. Just did their job. Their guardianship was only part-time, just a portion of their lives. So, can you imagine how well the owner of the flock would take care of His own sheep? "I'm the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. "I lay down my life for my sheep."

I wonder if that make us the oblivious flock, then? What I mean is, how much time do we spend just grazing away, day in and day out, completely unaware of the dangers that lurk around us? How often are we so engrossed in our own little patch of grass that we don't even notice how much the Good Shepherd has done on our behalf. Let alone listen to His warnings, or what He is calling us to do? And how many times are we so focused on feeding our own faces, gobbling up our daily bread, that we don't even notice the other sheep around us, maybe even sheep in danger or distress?

And here is the thing! We're not just the sheep! All throughout the New Testament we're reminded that we are actually the Sheepdogs! That's one of the foundational premises of the Protestant Reformation, right, the "Priesthood of all Believers"! In other words, to continue with the metaphor, not all Sheepdogs wear collars!

And what that means is, as great as those Sheepdogs were in my Wiley E. Coyote cartoons, each one of us is called to be even better! Jesus is our example, our ideal, the One who laid down His life for the Flock! And we are called to do the same! That revelation may be way bigger than you have ever considered before! But clearly, you and I are the ones responsible for those around us!

Think about it! Sheep and Sheepdogs look a lot alike, don't they! They both have four legs, and are both covered in fur. They both lie down in the same pastures, green or otherwise. They drink from the same pools, which are hopefully still! The same rain falls on the backs of the Sheep, and the Sheepdogs!

The same cold winds threaten to blow them away! The same unknown noise startles them both. It may be difficult to tell them apart sometimes! The same dangers abound in both of their worlds. Wolves and lions and bears threaten each one! And the very same temptations assail them, greener-looking pastures and such! And let's be honest, they even smell alike! So, maybe ask yourself, what's your role on the farm?

A Second-Shift Sheepdog, just watching and waiting in the wings for your turn to punch in, isn't who Jesus calls us to be! Nor is the ever-vigilant First-Shift Sheepdog, who is only waiting for his turn to punch out! That won't do either! Neither one of these part-time guardians is the model we find in the Biblical witness? That's not enough to take care of this Flock!

Being the Body of Christ is actually more like being a parent. It's a twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week, for the rest of your life kind of thing! We called to jump-in and help whenever it's needed! Immediately, by-the-way! Do whatever it takes! Loving each and every one of the Flock, all the time! That's our responsibility as part of the fold! We are called to be the Guardians at the Gate!

Only, are we? That's really the question we need to ask and answer. Are we feeding and caring for the Flock, the entire Flock? Are we protecting the rest of the fold? Are we doing this, even to the point of giving up our life for them? How about at least some of our life, our free-time? Are we willing to give that up? Or are we simply playing the role of an oblivious sheep?

The job of the Good Shepherd is obvious! And we, as Faithful Sheepdogs are called to follow His lead! We are to be the Body for each other, to care for, and love one another, with our actions, as well as our words! “We know what love is,” John states, “that Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for each other!”

So, would you? Really? Would you do that for your brothers and sisters? Would you give up your life for that furry little sheep sitting next to you, or for the one in front of you or behind you? Or for the one across the aisle? Or for those who, for whatever reason, have already wandered off? Or who are on the edge of the pasture even now!

I know you shouldn't push metaphors too far. But this Sheep one, seems to have legs! It truly forces us to look at our role in the Flock, doesn't it? Are you a Leader, showing others the source of strength and nourishment? Or are you an Encourager, bleating and nudging to help your sisters and brothers make it safely home? Are you a “Nuzzler” maybe, one who demonstrates a deep sense of love? Or a Barker, one who helps keep the flock moving in the right direction? Or are you simply oblivious, completely unaware, focused entirely on the little patch of grass in front you? It makes you think, doesn't it?

Let's assume you're not a stubborn old goat, dug in, determined to do things your way, no matter what! And thank heavens you are not a Judas Goat! According to those books on flock mentality, sheep tend to trust the other animals around them, even the goats. Slaughterhouses, for years, took advantage of this fact. They would train a goat, called a Judas Goat, to lead the flock astray.

They would teach it to walk up a ramp, while all the unsuspecting sheep followed. And then, at the top of the ramp, a gate would open, and the Judas Goat would quickly exit. All the sheep continued on though, into the slaughterhouse. A well-trained Judas Goat could play that role over and over again, betraying countless, unsuspecting Sheep! I'll bet you can guess how they got the name! So, what's your role here in the Flock?

Again, our model, our mentor, is Jesus, our Lord! So, we need to keep our eye on Him! "I am the Good Shepherd," He says. "I willingly lay down my life for my sheep." I am not some hired hand who avoids responsibility, or only works part-time! I'm not one who runs away at the first sign of danger, or a day-laborer who thinks only of himself!

I don't distance myself when there is pain involved. I stay the course! I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the Flock! And you, therefore, as my Disciples, as those who say they want to follow me, need to be willing to do the same!

That's actually the reason that we have been called together as a Flock! In doing this, we make God's Love, and Presence known in the world! We proclaim what God is really like! And how well we do that, comes down to the choices we make.

Jean Paul Sartre, a French Philosopher, asserted, "that the thing that makes us human, that which separates us from the animals, is our ability to choose. In every circumstance in life," he says "we have the freedom to choose, even if we don't realize that we are choosing."

And he goes on. “Our lives are not a given,” he says. “We are not genetically or socially predetermined to do anything! Our lives are actually the sum total of the choices that we make!” As Christians, we usually call it “Free Will”. But it’s the same thing, isn’t it?

So, here is the bottom line! Will you choose to run away when things get tough? Or choose to stay and be faithful? Will you choose to look out for others, or choose to think only of yourself? Will you choose to boldly declare your faith, like Peter and John in front of the Sanhedrin—choose to boldly state that Salvation is found in no other Name under Heaven than Jesus Christ? Or will you choose to slink away, hoping to be unnoticed?

Will you choose to love the other sheep around you, all of the other sheep around you, including those who are scruffy, and those who are in other sheep pens? Will you choose to love all of those who listen to the Shepherd’s call, our own flock, and all “those others”, even to the point of death? Or will you choose to act like a hired hand, and punch out when you think you’ve had enough? Or choose to lead others astray? It does really all come down to the choices, doesn’t it?

So, how do you think we are doing with the flock entrusted to our care? Sheep can be skittish you know, and more than a little stubborn. Sheep will wander away if you don’t pay attention, and even bleat at you when you try to pull them out of a ditch! It’s tough to be a Shepherd, or a Sheepdog, or even a fellow sheep!

You know, one of those books that I mentioned is titled, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. It suggests that sheep need four things in order to be content. First, they need to be Free of Fear. Green pastures and still waters are not enough. Sheep need to know that they are loved, and that they belong. Second, sheep need to be Free from Friction with other sheep. We are very social creatures you know. We need to have the hurts between us healed. Third, for sheep to settle down, happy and whole, we need to be Free from Irritants. That's what the "anoints my head with oil" phrase means. Shepherds would use oil to keep irritating flies at bay. And fourth, sheep need to be Fed. Wholeness can't happen when hunger abounds!

According to modern Psychology, Brain Development Theory and Brain Training, people are quite similar. In order to thrive, we each need a Place to Belong, to be part of the Flock. Second, we need a way to Receive, and then to Give—to be Nourished, and then to help Nourish others. Third, we need a way to Return to Joy after an emotional set back—to receive that Oil of Comfort. And fourth, we need a way to Mature and Grow, to start living the way God created us to be.

I guess we can learn a lot by watching the Flock. Maybe even what it means to Follow the Shepherd. And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh Lord, thank you for all the blessings that you constantly bestowed upon us! They are so plentiful, and far too abundant for us to even number! Thank you for our lives, and for our families and friends that you have brought into them! Thank you for this church family, and for the love that we share with each other! Thank you for this day, Lord, and this time of worship, for hearts that are filled with love, and minds that are open to guidance! And thank you for your Spirit, which gives the breath of life to all these things!

You are our source of strength Lord, and our one true hope. Salvation is found in no other name! You are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And you are the One we turn to in both celebration and pain. So, Lord, as we do that today, please turn to us as well, and smile upon us. We lift up before you.....

Grant healing, Lord, where this is needed. And peace, Lord, on troubled hearts and lives. Pour out your guidance on those who are lost. Reach out your hand to those who search. Give compassion, Lord, and overflowing love to those who hurt. Bring joy, Lord, to those who are in despair. And give eternal life, Lord, to all who call upon your Name.

Bless us now, Lord, your church, this little flock that meets in the shelter of angel's wings. And cause us to be a blessing to others. Empower us to boldly proclaim your Truth, and lovingly share your heart. Use us, Lord, as instruments of your peace and your presence, as radiant beams of your light and your love, in this ever-darkening world.

We ask these things in Jesus' Name, and lift them before your Altar of Grace, along with the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father...